

# Political identity and citizenship of young new Italian Europeans<sup>1</sup>

Sandra Chistolini, Università degli Studi Roma Tre (Italy)

## Abstract

*Within the framework of the Erasmus Jean Monnet Academic Network Project for Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe (CiCe), the research on the construction of identity and citizenship of young Europe in Italy discovers relevant assumptions of political awareness. Investigation is part of Alistair Ross scientific conversations with adolescents of South Europe and gives contents of building national and European identities in the perspective of learning how to develop social personality in a problematic future. The results are a breakdown of the world-wide reconsideration of different political identities of those preparing to rule Europe. The maturing of a multiple membership in Europe that changes, the kaleidoscope of identities (contingent and consistent), emerge as relevant empirical data in the context of the guide to the methodology of social constructivism and the prevalence of speech on experiences. Focus groups allowed teenagers to speak and record meaning of identity and citizenship by removing scholars from the static romantic idea of the nation state and from that nationalistic idealism of a past that sometimes suggests reappearing in disowned forms from the social and cultural maturation of young people. It is impossible to generalize, to be absent and silent towards political emergencies which design a new shape of old Europe. The data processed show how and why adolescents feel at the same time unsure about politics and sure about fundamental values rooted in family and school. The socio-biographical conversation is not a sequence of quantitative numbers, nor a photography of present, nor a psychologic introspection. It is a living matter, an experience of political truth which leads to rethinking political formation of young people for participation beyond any absenteeism. This incontrovertible fact represents new instances of democratic citizenship with premises of social change.*

## Keywords

Identity – Citizenship – Europeans - Political education – Participation

---

<sup>1</sup> If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:  
Chistolini, S. (2020) *Political identity and citizenship of young new Italian Europeans*. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 835 - 842). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

## Introduction

The research being presented in this paper concerns the construction of the political identity of young Europeans and citizenship over the period of 2014-2016. It forms part of the project promoted by Alistair Ross Jean Monnet, Professor of Citizenship Education in Europe, and eminent professor of London Metropolitan University (UK), within the activities of the CiCe, *Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe*, and the CiCea, *Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association*. The maturing of multiple belonging to a changing Europe, the *kaleidoscope of identities*, both contingent and consistent (Ross, 2015), emerges as an even more relevant empirical factor, if read within the guiding context of the social constructivist approach chosen by Ross and the narrative meaningfulness of the experiences collected (Goffman, 1969; Ross, 1987; Ratner, 2002; Beck, 2002). Allowing youth to express their meaning of identity and citizenship moves away from the romantic, static idea of the nation state and nationalist idealism of a past that sometimes hints at reappearing in ways recanted by the social and cultural maturing of the young people interviewed. There are multiple experiences. If it is impossible to generalise, it is equally impossible to remain mute in recognising the present experience. The strong point of social constructivism is that identity, also national, is a question of political choice and not a natural given (Ross, 2015).

## Reading the identity

To be mentioned among the significant contributions is the model conceived by Bruter (2005), who examines the cultural and civic perspectives as two essential components of identity in political communities. The former (the cultural perspective) concerns “political identities, as the sense of belonging a person feels towards a political group, perceived as being defined by a culture, values, religion, ethics or even ethnicity”. The latter (the civic perspective) refers to the “identification of citizens with a civic structure, such as the State, which can be defined as a set of institutions, rights and rules that preside over the political life of the community”.

Europe can be seen as a ‘Superstate’ or a cultural entity with the sharing of civilisations and heritage. To identify oneself with one’s own country and Europe assumes many meanings in terms of constructing one’s own personal identity.

The distinction of the cultural and civic perspectives could also describe the polarisation of the meanings and unquestionably allow for understanding the formation of ‘otherness’ as part of one’s identity. It constitutes a combination of the perspectives as regards the sense of exclusion and inclusion of others, including minorities.

The feeling of belonging exclusively to one’s own country is characterised by cultural assimilation and generates social segregations with little identification with Europe. An inclusive identity has non-rigid boundaries, opens up to tolerance

and supports a strong European identity. Alongside this model, Ross places that of Jamieson (2002), who sees identity in terms of passion for or indifference to national or European identity (Ross, 2015).

The qualitative analysis (Gergen & Gergen, 1986) of the narratives communicates much about the meanings young people are developing and that they are asked to expound upon with their peers. The centrality of sharing the narrations validates the focus group, as an analytical tool of identities. Listening to what a young person narrates allows a researcher to understand the discussion of a peer group, without the potential distortion that sometimes disrupts the fluidity of the narration (Ross, 2015).

Conversation opens the youthful scenario and reveals unexpected, existential bonds. The identity of the person is in movement and even more so is the identity of an adolescent, who wonders about being part of a country, and even part of several countries, that moment of transition from political unawareness to awareness and to playing a social role.

Through the analyses of Ross, the tie among semantic nuclei, such as democracy, freedom, rights, interculture and citizenship, from which the outline of the new horizons is derived, allows for overcoming any personality stereotypes of young people.

## **Research on young Europeans**

The secondary school survey highlights the knowledge acquired with regard to the social, cultural and political preparation of adolescents. Resulting from the questions aimed at understanding identity and the sense of citizenship are replies that describe the current state of political experience and outlooks for the future.

Students discuss the subject-matters related to their perceptions and points of view. According to Ross, social identities are recognised as being characterised by multiple, contingent connotations that include the idea of Europe. European development depends on some shared form, some factor that we can identify with (for example, a shared conception of the differences of Europe, or a conception of Europe seen as 'the other', or as a shared young culture). Understanding how young Europeans construct the meaning of being European is of great interest to all.

The year 2014 saw the completion of the study on constructing identities carried out on 974 young people aged between 11 and 19, from 15 European countries that have either joined the European Union since 2004 (Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia,) or were candidate countries in 2012 (Croatia, Iceland, FYROM and Turkey) (Ross, 2015).

The new generation interviewed was the first one born after the fall of the Berlin Wall, (that is, after 1989) whose political experience is completely different from that of their parents and grandparents. This aspect has a considerable impact on the social construction of young people (Ross, 2015).

### **Approach and Italian focus group**

In Italy, the nature and structure of the survey carried out in February 2015 draws on the survey of 2010-2012, as regards:

- a. the actual methodological reference of social constructivism and narrative value of the accounts (Ross, 2015);
- b. the request for collaboration and presentation of the research at the schools (Ross, 2015);
- c. the outline followed in the focus groups (Ross, 2015).

It is specified that the social constructivist approach and choice of narrative value of the data collected definitely remain the same in the various surveys and assume the value of the overall, common, theoretical framework, including any local updates. In the survey in Italy, and in the sample groups of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, Finland, France, Norway and Germany (Ross 2018), emphasis is on the relationship between the questions and answers, with sudden changes in the subject.

I am still following the same social constructivist approach as in this volume, and the 'request for assistance' was pretty similar. The focus group outline was somewhat modified, and my current account (for the next book) will stress the conversational approach I sought, and emphasise how the questions tried to follow the responses, rather than direct and thus potentially constrain what the young people wanted to say. My account of this is still in draft form (and is now quite long!)” (Ross, email to Sandra Chistolini, 06 September 2017).

Following thoughts expressed naturally while conversing and narrating shows methodological sensitivity and a sign of respect for young people.

Of course, the identity of the person is in movement and even more so is the identity of an adolescent, who wonders about being part of a country, and even part of several countries, that moment of transition from political unawareness to awareness and to playing a social role.

Through the analyses of Ross, the tie among semantic nuclei, such as democracy, freedom, rights, interculture and citizenship, from which the outline of the new horizons is derived, allows for overcoming any stereotypes of personalities of young people.

For our survey, we chose a sample of students of secondary school age to talk to about the hot topics of social belonging, social feeling, civic participation and the adhesion to values of what we call politics and what is of major interest for the

community. This small-size qualitative survey shed light on how adolescents build up their identities and become aware of their European citizenship, from synchronic and diachronic viewpoints. We ask ourselves about today and try to predict the near future. To ask how young people construct their identities and what potential can be highlighted by their conversation, through questions of a cultural nature, allows for entering into the specific issue of political development. The idea of the research, which began with Ross (2015), focuses on listening to a small group of students talk about subjects related to their perceptions and ways of seeing things. According to this British scholar, social identities are recognised as being characterised by multiple, contingent connotations that include the idea of Europe. European development depends on some shared form, some factor that we can identify in, for example, a shared conception of the differences of Europe, or a conception of Europe seen as ‘the other’, or as a shared young culture. Understanding how young Europeans construct their idea of Europe, understanding their role within that idea and the meaning of being European, directly and indirectly impacts the scheduling of our school curriculum.

In Italy, the survey was carried out on February 2-6, 2015. The planned sample group was 120 students; the effective group was 138 students, of which 53 were in the North (Padua and Bologna), 31 in the Centre (Rome), and 55 in the South (Bari and Matera).

### **Youth from different time periods**

In Italy, the surveys on young Europeans were done by researchers committed to combining the empirical evidence with the prospects of building a united Europe, as pertains, also, to the social and cultural transformations, engrossing a world just emerging from a second world war. The research by Lutte et al. (1969) involving 32,000 adolescents in Europe, referred to a description of the person, or celebrated figure, that the young people held in the highest esteem and who they wished to emulate. After about half a century, if we wish to understand what has changed in forming the political character of young Europeans, we could say that the field of what we call “ideal” has broadened considerably, reaching the inclusion of processes that are no longer only European, but preferable worldwide. Thinking globally, based on things and experience, seems to have become an inner need that can be explained in terms of diversity, pluralism and interdependence. A reversal undoubtedly facilitated by the world wide web. The year 1969 provided young people, between ten and seventeen years of age, passionate about fantasising, with an ideal of a more human, authentic life, compared to previous generations, and, in a certain sense, having trouble finding the right words to express themselves, marking their narrations by a meaningful interweaving of “individual action” and “collective strength”; they felt worthy and important because the group gave them strength and brought them out of isolation and anonymity. Living together had a multiplying, driving effect towards

change. The feeling of unity arose from the community experience and was set out at a degree of sensible criticality in proposing judgments against a society lacking in ideals. The unequivocal agreement in refusing totalitarian models, translated into the disavowal of the war and racism, was a sign of a mixed culture of ideal aspirations.

The research of Ross shows a decisive shift in direction. We talk preferably about multiple identities and, thus, with ideals in ascending and descending order meant to meet by chance, by a digital and virtual process, rather than by sharing a philosophy of life or maturing a denominational belief. What upsets the picture is undoubtedly the assessment of those young people who believe they are not authoritarian and racist, as they find previous generations to be.

These observations give rise to a cultural, pedagogical dispute about intergenerational comparison in Europe. If parents and grandparents are now perceived as authoritarian and racist by their children and grandchildren, it means that these same parents and grandparents, who were adolescents in 1969 and had rejected totalitarian and racist models, have changed over time, ending up losing sight of the ideals of brotherhood, solidarity and communitarianism, which they had strongly embraced in their youth.

## **A glance at the results about new youth**

The confirmation of the decline in respect for rights, solidarity and equality, the requirement for social justice, the contradictions of a united Europe, all show the potentials of a new political mobilisation. In the background, we find the awareness that one can pursue one's individuality by relating to others. This does not appear to be a human necessity of the community need inspired by the personalism of Maritain (1944), but rather, individuality, as related to others, is defined as an inevitable tool induced by technology. The terms "individualism" and "communitarianism" lose their earlier descriptive effectiveness. They could have been subsumed by the experience of solidarity that would, however, deserve further scrutiny.

As Porcarelli (2018) writes:

A recurring element that arises as much from the verbalisations of young people, as from the analysis of Italian regulations, in this regard, is the substantial absence of a social, civic and political education. If we consider that this vacuum of educational offer takes place during an historic period of severe political crisis, in which not only the rise of movements characterised by a 'antipolitical' populist culture is recorded, but also in a climate of growing distrust towards institutions.

About the sense of belonging to Europe, Lastrucci (2018) writes:

As far as feeling European is concerned and whether being part of the Union is deemed advantageous or not, based also on what was shown by the majority of the participants in discussing relations between national identity and European

identity, and based on the probe-questions and relative tendencies in the replies, most of the students find that there are unquestionably positive factors in the process of integration, the principal ones being constituted by the single currency and free circulation of persons and goods within the entire Community.

The political choice of young people of the third millennium requires a view about existentialist reality, far from the authentic human, which was all the talk half a century ago, with an alarming drop in the fear of a possible return of nationalism and dogmatic religions. It is unclear how one can predict that nationalism and dogmatism will not return within the fragile bracket of the population and partly among political intellectuals. Of course, migrations, terrorism and globalisation appeal to the thoughts of young people and supply logical justifications for the view of a politically uncertain Europe concerning common orientations.

## Conclusions

On the whole, adolescents have biographies through which they relate to differentiated social and political contexts. Recalling one's own story about a country may be, to some, a fundamental step of national, political identification, while what surfaces to others, who do not wish to talk about it as an experience in the family and local community, is the identifying search for a common narration. Young European migrants have socio-political tales that are just as foreign to the country of origin as they are to the country of arrival. They try to imagine a non-rigid political space, where belonging is guaranteed. Within this process of identification, we unexpectedly read the revival of Europe, born about thirty years ago, according to the new aspects of cultural and civil belonging to values around which the prospect of widely remarked political growth is concentrated. The identity of young Europeans is an experiential reality, which cannot be disregarded and is the only sure way to identify the fields of that political formation, to which schools and teachers can and must reasonably turn their attention. Many adolescents intuit the high road to follow. However, they find themselves stripped of that investiture of exercising the right to participate, without, which every change tends to evolve in the form of an acephalous reproduction of the consensus.

## References

- Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim E. (2002). *Individualization. Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bruter, M. (2005). *Citizens of Europe? The emergence of a mass European identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Chistolini, S., Lastrucci, E. & Porcarelli, A. (2018). *Giovani europei e cittadinanza. Lo studio sugli adolescenti italiani nel contesto della ricerca internazionale sull'identità politica*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia.
- Corradini, L. (1976). *Democrazia scolastica*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Gergen, M. & Gergen, K. (1986). Narrative form and the construction of psychological science. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology. The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 254-273). New York: Praeger.
- Goffman, E. (1969). *Strategic interaction*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jamieson, L. (2002). Theorising Identity, Nationality and Citizenship. Implications for European Citizenship Identity. *Sociología*, 34(6), 507-532.
- Lutte, G. (1969). *Adolescenti d'Europa. Modelli di comportamento e valori inchiesta realizzata con il contributo del Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche*. Torino: Società editrice internazionale.
- Maritain, J. (1944). *Education at the crossroads*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ratner, C. (2002). Subjectivity and Objectivity in Qualitative Methodology [29 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(3), Art. 16, <http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0203160>. Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/829/1801>
- Ross, A. (1987). Political education in the primary school. In C. Harber (Ed.), *Political Education in Britain* (pp. 9-25). London: Falmer.
- Ross, A. (2015). *Understanding the Constructions of Identities by Young New Europeans. Kaleidoscopic selves*. London: Routledge.
- Ross, A. (2018). *Finding Political Identities: Young people in a changing Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Varoufakis, Y. (2017). *Adults in the room. My battle with Europe's deep establishment*. London: The Bodley Head.